



**Circle R Property
PROPOSED MANAGEMENT PLAN**

June 4, 2008

Circle R Property Proposed Management Plan

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PART 1.0 SITE DESCRIPTION, RESOURCE VALUES AND ADMINISTRATION

1.1: Introduction

The Circle R Property, as of the date of this plan, is being considered for acquisition by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP). This 4,666-acre property is located on the north side of the Yellowstone River and includes riparian river bottom, sagebrush-grassland, and ponderosa pine savannah habitats. This Proposed Management Plan will provide a description of the purpose, objectives, and management strategies for this property. Detailed management objectives and strategies will be identified and incorporated if the property is acquired. This plan would be periodically updated to ensure that project continues to fulfill the identified purpose(s). This would include a process to involve the public, other agencies and adjoining landowners. Management of this area will require careful consideration and action over time and will also be responsive to agency and public needs as well as other considerations such as impacts to neighboring properties.

Property Location: The property consists of 4,666 contiguous acres, including 3,976 deeded, 621 State School Trust (SST) lease, and 69 acres U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lease, on the north side of the Yellowstone River. It offers about 5 miles of Yellowstone River frontage along its southern border. The ranch is bordered on the west by 4,760 contiguous acres of currently inaccessible (except by boat via the Yellowstone River) public lands, including 640 acres of SST land and 3,200 acres of BLM land. The ranch is bordered on the north and east by other private lands. The property is accessible by county road on the east end. Pompey's Pillar National Monument is 2.5 miles east of the southeast corner of the property. Legal Description: Deeded - T3N, R29E, Sec. 8 (640 acres), Sec. 9 (640 acres), Sec. 10 (320 acres in S1/2), Sec. 13 (274.87 acres in W1/2), Sec. 14 (640 acres), Sec. 15 (640 acres), Sec. 17 (600.67 acres), Sec. 21 (39.52 acres in N1/2N1/2), Sec. 23 (181.32 acres in N1/2); SST – T3N, R29E, Sec. 16 (620.64 acres); BLM – T3N, R29E, Sec. 22 (68.62 acres in N1/2N1/2).

Resource Values: The tremendous habitat diversity within the ranch creates year-round habitat for many species and seasonal habitat for others. The lush riparian river bottom provides habitat for white-tailed deer, pheasants, and wild turkeys. Wood ducks nest in the area, and the backwater sloughs provide roosting areas for ducks and geese.

Riparian and wetland communities support some of the highest concentration of plants and animals in Montana. The multi-layered plant canopy provided along the Yellowstone River corridor provides a variety of nesting, resting, and foraging areas for wildlife. There are 17 Tier I Species of Greatest Conservation Need that rely on riparian and wetland habitat for breeding and/or survival (FWP 2005).

The uplands consist of “breaks” interspersed with open bench lands. Ponderosa pine savannahs are intermingled with sagebrush-grasslands. Several drainages create rugged canyons that are ideal escape terrain for mule deer. There are mule deer, antelope, and occasionally a few elk on the property. Sage grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge, turkeys, and ring-necked pheasants occupy habitats within the property.

There are over 300 terrestrial vertebrate species that are found within the grasslands community type that is found within this parcel. The Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CFWCS) (FWP 2005) lists the following Tier I Species of Greatest Conservation Need that may be found in mixed shrub and grassland communities: northern leopard frog, western hog-nosed snake, milkshake, greater sage-grouse, mountain plover, long-billed curlew, burrowing owl, spotted bat, Townsend’s big-eared bat, pallid bat, black-tailed prairie dog, and meadow jumping mouse (FWP 2005).

Within the boundary of the proposed land acquisition, there is a large black-tailed prairie dog colony. Black-tailed prairie dogs have been identified as Tier 1 in the CFWCS (FWP 2005). More than 30 vertebrate species are considered dependent on the prairie dog ecosystem for food or shelter.

Rocky outcrops carved by the Yellowstone River provide unique finite habitat resources for many bats, birds, and reptiles, including Townsend’s big-eared bat, northern myotis, milk snake, greater short-horned lizard, and common sagebrush lizards.

Irrigated land in the river bottom totals about 90 acres. This acreage is irrigated with two new center-pivot sprinklers that utilize river water from a new intake pump, all of which are included with the property. The ability to manage these acres to maximize high quality food production and/or nesting cover is an important addition to the habitat diversity on this property.

The Yellowstone River corridor represents an important cultural landscape where indigenous peoples have traveled, camped and subsisted for centuries. The Crow or Absaalooke tribe has inhabited the area most recently, although there is recorded evidence of people in the area for at least 9,000 years. In 1806 William Clark and twelve other members of the Lewis & Clark Expedition traveled down the Yellowstone River drainage to explore its upper reaches. Pompey’s Pillar, a large freestanding sandstone column, is just downstream of the property proposed for acquisition. This landmark figures prominently in Native American history, and it bears the only on-site physical evidence of the Lewis and Clark expedition, William Clark’s inscription. The US Bureau of Land Management manages the pillar as a National Historic Landmark.

The specific type and extent of cultural resources and artifacts are unknown at present, but it’s highly likely that the property has a rich assemblage of cultural resources.

1.2: Authority

FWP is authorized through Montana Code Annotated (87-1-209, MCA) to acquire lands for purchase for the purpose of wildlife and/or fisheries protection, fishing, hunting, outdoor recreation, and/or to consolidate lands for these purposes, with the approval of the FWP Commission and the Board of Land Commissioners. FWP has powers and duties regarding the acquisition of lands by fee or donation as state historical sites and recreation areas (MCA 23-1-102). The department may cooperate with other federal, state or local agencies to acquire, plan, establish, and maintain parks (MCA 23-1-107).

FWP is authorized by Section to acquire lands by purchase, gift, or other agreement, or acquire easements upon lands or waters for certain purposes, including public fishing and outdoor recreation (MCA 87-1-209).

PART 2.0 VISION STATEMENT

The primary purpose of the Circle River Ranch will be the conservation and enhancement of habitat for big game, upland game birds, waterfowl, and non-game wildlife. A balance between healthy resources and the needs of visitors will be emphasized. As such, the majority of the property will be undeveloped and managed as a Wildlife Management Area (WMA) with a small portion developed and designated as a State Park.

The property has great potential to provide excellent recreational opportunities, with most of the visitation coming from the local area. The site will provide for both consumptive and non-consumptive recreational activities. Diverse outdoor recreational opportunities provided at the site may include hunting, fishing, river floating, hiking, camping, wildlife watching, photography, natural and cultural history discovery, and education.

A limited number of facilities will be developed to provide for public use and enjoyment of the site. These may include signs, road improvements, parking areas, sanitary facilities, camping areas, trails, and informational and interpretive exhibits. Infrastructure will be developed to ensure that the primary goal of habitat conservation is emphasized. The FWP goals of site stewardship, protecting natural and cultural resources, and supporting a safe, comfortable, and educational visitor experience will be supported. Management will also consider and address the effects that public ownership of this parcel has on adjoining landowners and the local community. It has the potential to contribute to local economies.

OVERALL GOAL STATEMENT: The management goal of the proposed Circle R River Ranch acquisition will be to:

- Conserve the native vegetation of the area and the riparian areas along the Yellowstone River
- Maintain or enhance native plant and animal species diversity of the project area
- Provide public hunting opportunities in the area
- Provide other public outdoor recreational opportunities
- Be a “good neighbor” to adjoining properties and the local community and economy

PART 3.0 NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

3.1: Habitat/Vegetation Management

Objective: Conserve, maintain, and enhance native plant communities in the riparian and upland habitats within the project area.

Management Strategies:

- a) Obtain appropriate baseline biological data for the property to assess management needs, including topographic and soils maps, aerial photos, distribution and abundance of Plant and Animal Species of Concern, and distribution and abundance of game and non-game wildlife and fish in the property area.
- b) Assess the upland and riparian habitat and identify any potential improvement projects that may be necessary to maximize fish and wildlife habitat on the property.
- c) Develop livestock grazing management plans to enhance grassland community vitality, considering such conditions and options as:
 - Rest-rotation grazing system
 - Season of grazing
 - Class of livestock
 - Existing and required fencing
 - Vegetation monitoring – utilization, range condition, trend
 - Water development/water lanes
 - Grazing lease stipulations
 - **Initial management will be complete rest (i.e. no livestock grazing)**
- d) If vegetation management occurs, vegetation trend monitoring will be implemented using such methods as photo plots, browse evaluation, and cover plots/transects.

3.2: Noxious Weed management

Objective: Control noxious weeds to prevent loss of native species and decline in plant community productivity.

Management Strategies:

- a) Identify noxious weed infestations on the property.
- b) Develop a weed management plan operating under the guidelines of the 2008 FWP Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Plan.
- c) Implement control and eradication as soon as practical. Weed management will involve using techniques that will have minimal impacts to fish and wildlife habitat.
- d) Coordinate with county weed districts

3.3: Wildlife Management

Objective: To maintain healthy wildlife populations for use and enjoyment by the public.

Management Strategies:

- a) Manage the uplands to provide high-quality habitat for a variety of game and non-game species
 - Livestock grazing management, if implemented, would be the primary tool, utilizing rest-rotation grazing system
 - **Initial grazing management will be complete rest**
- b) Manage the riparian habitat to provide high-quality habitat for a variety of game and non-game species
 - Livestock grazing management, if implemented, would be the primary tool, **with light to no livestock grazing in the riparian areas**
 - Weed control
- c) Manage the existing 90 acres of irrigated farmland to maximize high quality wildlife food production and/or nesting cover.
 - Establish food plots for big game animals and upland game birds.
 - Establish nesting/brood-rearing cover for upland game birds.
 - The irrigated river bottom food/cover plots will help hold animals on the property and minimize potential problems with adjoining landowners.
- d) There should be no game damage problems on this property if it is owned by a public agency.
 - FWP will work with neighboring landowners who qualify for game damage assistance with wildlife game damage issues.
- e) Properly managed hunting will help keep animal populations at desired levels.
 - Hunting will be managed primarily through designation of motorized vehicle travel routes, with only foot travel allowed off of designated travel routes.

- f) Establish population trend surveys for selected game and non-game species.

PART 4.0 HERITAGE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

4.1: Heritage Resource Protection

Objective: Heritage resources will be protected and interpreted as an integral part of the landscape.

Management Strategies:

- a) Inventory heritage resources located on the property.
- b) Utilize the Parks Division Heritage Resources Program Manager to develop a heritage resources management strategy.
- c) Consult with the State Historic Preservation Office as necessary.
- d) Educate the public about the importance of leaving heritage resources undisturbed for future generations.
- e) Interpret the sites cultural resources through sensitive and appropriate displays, programs, and information.

PART 5.0 RECREATION MANAGEMENT

5.1: Recreational Opportunities

Objective: Provide compatible public recreational use of the property while ensuring conservation of important habitat and wildlife values.

Management Strategies:

- a) Public access will be allowed year-round as long as resource conflicts are not present.
- b) Vehicle-accessible overnight camping will be provided if and when a designated campground is developed. No overnight use will be allowed until operations and staffing allow otherwise.

5.2: Public Access

Objective: Public access will be provided at appropriate and strategic location.

Management Strategies:

- a) Design and implement public access plan consistent with wildlife/habitat management objectives, which may include;
 - mode of travel delineated– walk-in, horseback, vehicular
 - numbers of people could be limited if resource conflicts become evident.
- b) Develop a primary entrance with vehicle access along the existing entrance road.

- c) Restrict vehicles to designated roads, parking areas, and developed campsites. Only foot traffic will be allowed off of designated travel routes.
- d) Prohibit OHV use throughout the site off designated routes.

5.3: Public Use Regulations

Objective: These lands would be managed for public use by regulating the level and type of access, level and type of facilities, and by implementing the standard FWP recreational use regulations (ARM 12.8.101-12.8.213), the FWP Commercial Use Rule (ARM 12.14.101-12.14.170), and any special regulations developed for this property. Permits will be required for group use, commercial use, scientific research and projects involving handling wildlife.

Management Strategy:

- a) Utilize existing ARM Rules pertinent to Wildlife Management Areas and State Parks and determine specific applicability for public use at Circle R.
- b) Discharge of firearms and weapons will be restricted to lawful hunting only. Recreational shooting will be prohibited (ARM 12.8.202).
- c) No person may permit an animal to run at-large in a designated public recreation area. Persons in possession of animals must keep them under control in a manner that does not cause or permit a nuisance, annoyance, or danger to others. In developed campgrounds the animal must be physically restrained or on a leash under ten feet in length in hand or anchored at all times.
- d) If their use is deemed appropriate, recreational livestock such as pack and saddle animals will be restricted to designated areas and roads only. Horse riders must accompany horses at all times. Horse grazing will be prohibited. Weed seed-free feed required (ARM 12.8.203).
- e) Motorized vehicles will be restricted to designated roads and parking areas. OHV use will be prohibited off designated routes (ARM 12.8.204).
- f) Camping will be permitted in designated sites only (ARM 12.8.205).
- g) Campfires will be permitted in designated steel fire grates only (12.8.206).
- h) Gathering or cutting firewood for off-site use will be prohibited (12.8.207).
- i) Removal of natural, geological, historical archeological property will be prohibited except for berries, fallen dead wood, or lawfully taken fish and game (12.8.207).
- j) Commercial use will require a permit in accordance with the Statewide Commercial Use Rules (ARM 12.14.101-170).

5.4: Marketing

Objective: The site will be publicized as a unique public resource as part of Montana's Wildlife Management Area and State Parks systems.

Management Strategies:

- a) Include this area on the FWP website for WMAs and State Parks.
- b) Develop a site-specific brochure including a map, resource information, recreational opportunities, and regulations.

- c) Install appropriate site designation signs at primary access points.

5.5: Trails

Objective: Hiking, stock, and mountain bike trails may be developed for public use if suitable locations and trail alignments can be found that do not adversely impact soils, vegetation, natural features, wildlife, fisheries, and cultural resources.

Management Strategies:

- a) Evaluate potential trail locations, alignments, routes, and destinations.
- b) Design and construct a trail system if appropriate locations can be located, and are consistent with WMA goals and objectives.
- c) Develop and implement trail maintenance and signing standards if consistent with WMA goals and objectives.

5.6: Hunting

Objective: Outstanding opportunities for hunting will be available to the public in accordance with existing hunting districts and regulations.

Management Strategies:

- a) Manage sport hunting in accordance with current hunting districts and regulations.
- b) Implement a hunting access system that allows FWP to monitor hunting activity.
- c) Hunting will be managed primarily through designation of motorized vehicle travel routes, with only foot travel allowed off of designated travel routes.
- d) Establish no hunting safety zones around developed facilities

5.7: Angling

Objective: Opportunities for angling in the Yellowstone River will be available in accordance with existing creel limits and fishing regulations.

Management Strategies:

- a) Consider watercraft and foot portals to facilitate access to fishing waters.

5.8: Education and Interpretation

Objective: FWP will develop educational and interpretive media and services that tell the story of the area's natural, cultural, and recreational resources.

Management Strategies:

- a) Develop appropriate educational and interpretive themes consistent with the site values and resources.
- b) Install a standard State Park informational kiosk at the primary site entrance.
- c) Develop on site programs as funding and staff allows.

- d) Provide detailed information regarding the area's natural, cultural, and recreational resources on the FWP home page.

5.9: Commercial Use

Objective: Commercial use may be considered if deemed a necessary and appropriate service for the public enjoyment and use of the site.

Management Strategy:

- a) Permit approved commercial use requests in accordance with the FWP Commercial Use Rule and Commercial Use Fee Rule (ARM 12.14.101-170).

5.10: Public Safety

Objective: Public safety measures will be proactively implemented.

Management Strategies:

- a) Provide an adequate law enforcement patrol and response presence on the site through the use of Game Wardens and Ex-officio Wardens.
- b) FWP properties that are not covered under direct fire protection by a wildland agency are covered by counties under a cooperative agreement with the state. The county agrees to provide protection to all non-forest district state properties in exchange for the state providing the county with training, equipment, and some planning assistance. FWP makes payments in lieu of taxes (PILT) to counties on FWP properties except State Parks, Fish Hatcheries, Bird Farms, and in counties where FWP owns less than 100 acres. The Worden Volunteer Fire Department is under contract with Yellowstone County for wildland fire suppression in the area of this property.
- c) During the fire season, FWP attends weekly fire conferences with County, State, and Federal entities to discuss the current fire danger and assess appropriate actions relative to potential fire restrictions. These restrictions may include closure of the site to public use.
- d) Motorized access on the property will be allowed only on designated travel routes.
- e) Fires will be limited to developed campgrounds with developed fire rings.
- f) Develop appropriate signage, regulatory postings, and educational messages related to public safety.

PART 6.0 ADMINISTRATION, OPERATIONS, & MAINTENANCE

Objective: Initial operations and management will be directed at securing the property, providing managed public access and addressing legitimate concerns of adjoining landowners. Funding and staffing will be secured to properly support site administration, operations, maintenance, and stewardship.

Management Strategies:

- a) Develop a strategy to provide an interim site presence capable of providing basic site stewardship while funding and FTE to administer the site is being pursued.
 - Target date of September 1, 2008 for opening the property to the public.
 - No overnight use will be allowed until operations funding and staffing allow otherwise.
- b) Pursue adequate operations funding and staffing to provide adequate site stewardship, administration, and visitor use management.
- c) Establish the following functional assignments and responsibilities consistent with FWP management of the site:

Wildlife Division
Wildlife Management, Habitat Conservation and Enhancement, Agricultural Plots, Grazing Management, Hunting Management, Boundary and Grazing Allotment Fencing
Parks Division
Visitor Use & Recreation Management, Interpretive Programs & Exhibits, Public Facility Maintenance
Enforcement Division
Law Enforcement, Public Safety, Assist With Emergency Operations
Shared
Noxious Weed Control, Access & Boundary Signing

The Circle R property will be managed utilizing management zones (see below). All FWP Divisions will cooperate in managing this property.

Wildlife Management Zone: This zone will be primarily managed and administered by the FWP Wildlife Division for WMA purposes and will include the following areas:

- Wildlife enhancement vegetation plots including irrigation systems.
- All areas not referenced below.

State Park Zone: This zone will be primarily managed and administered by the FWP Parks Division for Parks purposes and will include the following areas:

- Visitor contact and information facilities at the primary park portal.
- Any designated campground.
- Trails and interpretive displays and signage.

Administrative Zone: This zone includes areas and facilities to be jointly managed by all divisions of FWP for administration, operations and management of the property. It includes the following areas:

- Primary and secondary access roads and parking areas.
- Administrative facilities such as storage sheds, etc.

A map will be prepared to visually illustrate and delineate specific locations and acreages of these zones.

PART 7.0 CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

Objective: Initial development will include securing the property, providing managed public access and addressing legitimate concerns of adjoining landowners. FWP's Parks Division will strive to secure capital funding for public facilities and amenities that enhance the visitor experience.

Management Strategies:

- a) Initial development will include repair/construction of boundary fencing if needed, dust control on the access road including in front of neighbors residences, limited parking, and a pit latrine.
 - Target date of September 1, 2008 for completing initial development and opening the property to the public.
- b) Develop a concept plan for proposed facilities, including access roads, parking areas, signs, exhibits, latrines, vehicle campground, boat camps, trails, river access sites, and primary visitor contact station.
- c) Establish priorities for the phased development of facilities and amenities.
- d) Consult with the State Historical Preservation Office prior to engaging in ground disturbing construction or capital improvement projects.
- e) Implement a MEPA compliance process for all major construction or capital improvement projects.